

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Witness Testimony

United States House of Representatives

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Helen Chenoweth

Chairman

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Chairman Chenoweth and Subcommittee Members:

My name is Linda Wright, Director of Trinity County Health and Human Services. I have been with the Department for 15 years and believe during that time I have come to recognize that life in a rural county is not without its hardships. I appreciate this opportunity to share with you some of my observations and concerns as they relate to the impact of forest resource management revenues in Trinity County.

Trinity is a rural, mountainous county in northern California, with a population of 13,180 (California Department of Finance, 1/1/99). The majority of the population is centered in the Weaverville and Hayfork areas. The bulk of the county's economic activity is related to National Forest management (e.g., logging, lumber mills, tourism, recreation, watershed and fire management), with the exception of commercial and support services (e.g., stores and government services).

Our county is not unlike others in our Coalition, which find themselves faced with the challenge of meeting increased demands for services with diminishing resources. Welfare Reform has added yet another hurdle for counties.

The following points demonstrate the impact of declining revenues to Trinity County.

1. High Unemployment

The annual unemployment rate for Trinity County has been nearly twice the state average for more than a decade. Out of 58 counties, Trinity ranked 52nd with an unemployment rate of 16.7% for March of 1999 compared with the state average of 5.8% for that same month.

The impact of Hayfork's mill closure is apparent, when comparing Hayfork's 16.9% unemployment rate for 1998 to Weaverville's 4.9%. Approximately half of Trinity County's TANF caseload resides in Hayfork, creating even greater anxiety for families faced with the reality of Welfare Reform and time limited assistance.

The mill closure in Hayfork has contributed to the loss of 10 businesses, including the local laundromat. This creates an additional hardship for families that cannot afford the luxury of their own washing machine let alone the added cost of commuting to the laundromat 30 miles away. These businesses represented entry level employment opportunities as targeted in our county's CalWorks plan. This combined with declining school enrollment and cutbacks in our county road department present an even bleaker picture for families attempting to obtain self-sufficiency.

Discussions regarding economic development continue to target opportunities in natural resources. The Trinity County Board of Supervisors appointed a Natural Resources Advisory Council for "the purpose of integrating natural resource management, community well-being, economic development and job creation within Trinity County." This committee was formed in response to our county's need to develop employment opportunities for participants in the CalWorks Program as well as others negatively impacted by our declining economy.

2. Increased Demand for Child Protective Services

We have experienced a rise in the number of Child Protective Services referrals. They are more complex in nature due to increased substance abuse and domestic violence. Access to families is exacerbated by remoteness which is often necessary due to more affordable rents in the outlying areas.

Staff at the Parent Center in Hayfork has observed increasing occurrences of child neglect. Due to the necessity to seek employment out of the county, some families are attempting to maintain two households. Savings are depleted and only absolute necessities are affordable. Basic needs such as new shoes, clothing or even appliance or vehicle repairs are given lesser priority in place of food and shelter.

The children in these situations suffer the most. Withdrawal or acting out are frequent responses to the despair they feel due to the absence of a parent whether it's for employment purposes or

as a result of agency intervention.

3. Increased Juvenile Crime

While Trinity County's overall crime rate is below the state average, there has been a noted increase in juvenile crime during the past several years. The Trinity County Grand Jury report for 1998-98 sites the following:

"The trend of increasing juvenile crime, particularly those crimes related to poverty, is predicted to continue due to the economic climate in the county. The types of crimes committed by juveniles include burglary/theft (the most common juvenile crime), drug/alcohol related offenses, assault, and rape. Probation officials report that they are seeing more young people who are angry, violent, and out of control."

We are receiving repeated reports of teens left to fend for themselves, particularly in the Hayfork area. This can in part be attributed to parents forced to seek employment out of the county. In addition, parents experiencing a sense of frustration and dismay over the loss of employment are resorting to substance abuse to relieve their personal pain.

In conclusion, the lives of long time Trinity County residents are being impacted in a significantly negative manner, adults and children alike. My agency is responsible for ensuring that the resources needed for the health and well being of our county residents are available in times of need. Economic self-sufficiency for rural communities equates to self-sufficiency for those who reside here. We are faced with a variety of challenges to facilitate this process. Future decisions as they relate to national forest and BLM revenues must not lose sight of the human element. I urge your consideration of these matters in your search for solutions.

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